

# *Fathers, Incorporated*



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## **Teenagers and Attitudes Towards Fatherhood**

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May 2005

# "Teenage Attitudes Towards Fatherhood"

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## Focus Group Report

President Bush is currently encouraging the passage of "Healthy Families" initiatives, which place heavy emphasis on marriage. His premise is that public policy should strengthen healthy marriages and, where possible, the two-parent family. Further, his administration states that research consistently shows that healthy marriages benefit children, adults and society, whereas dysfunctional marriages do not.

In addition to this two parent family focus, the administration has taken a conservative stand that promotes abstinence. In a society where the encouragement and perpetuation of sex like no other time in our history is big business, the hypocrisy is that we admonish our young people that the right course for them is abstinence. To the extent that they cannot reconcile this seeming inconsistency of message, society has a duty to educate and inform them about the responsibility associated with engaging in unprotected sex and the things that can happen as a result. Further, youth must be engaged in constructive conversation around the realities of parenthood as current and potential members of that group.



While this goal of encouraging healthy marriages is admirable, there are a number of troubling issues that complicate this objective for some communities. For instance,

- ☐ Young inner-city men and women are not often exposed to healthy family roles models.
- ☐ Mortality and incarceration rates prevent some men who would even choose to have a place in their child's upbringing from doing so.
- ☐ There is an apparent inability of Black males and females to transcend the pervasive and long lasting effects of slavery and racism on the Black family unit.
- ☐ There is an oversaturation of negative imagery of Black manhood and masculinity (sex, violence & irresponsibility), which greatly impacts African heritage males' perspectives regarding healthy and unhealthy relationships.
- ☐ Current media and societal trends don't encourage marriage.
- ☐ The traditional reasons for marriage are typically overshadowed by the realities of its longevity.
- ☐ As divorce rates rise, the premise of marriage has become morally unimportant to many.
- ☐ The realities of government and poverty don't support the financial necessity to become or remain married.
- ☐ Most of the research that is being done does not adequately capture the realities of life in most communities of color; hence the policies and allocation of resources to address the specific complexities of this issue for these communities does not reflect the actual need.
- ☐ Males of African heritage are forced to create their own notions of manhood due to the lack of fathers and other male role models in the community and in schools
- ☐ The vast majority of research on African heritage male adolescents and young adults is conducted by other than African American male researchers, evaluators and/or graduate students. It is ,therefore, difficult to accurately describe mores and lifestyles of African heritage adolescents and/or young adult males.

The reality of today's society is that it is harder than probably ever in our history to be a teenager. They must be smarter, faster, mature more quickly, and handle more stress while maintaining traditional standards. Growing up in simpler times, i.e. less technology, less media, less worldly chaos and less personal consequence; youth of the 1950's – early 1990's, were

able to more easily avoid or disguise the effects of certain negative life experiences. In addition, the extended family was much more of a factor than in today's society.

Because of these new "stressors" and trends, adults and policy makers, service providers, and educational institutions are encouraged to take a more in-depth and comprehensive look at the attitudes of youth regarding parenthood. Policies, services, and support may need to begin to reflect a new attitude of parenting and being parented.

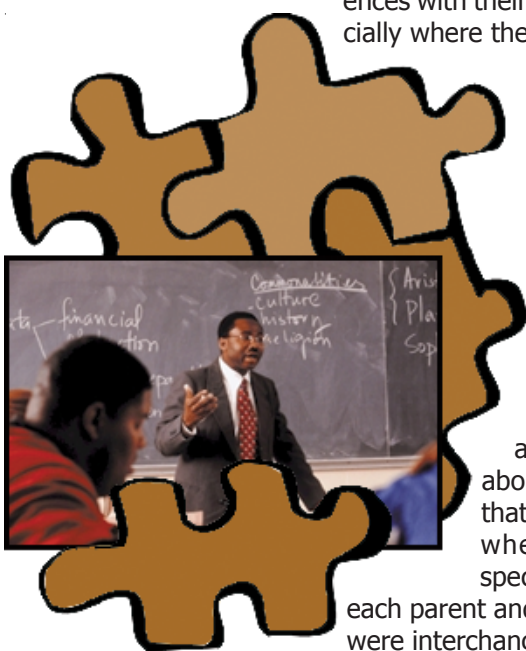
## Methodology

As part of a process of identifying attitudes and opinions, Fathers, Inc. held three focus groups designed to assist in understanding the attitudes of teenagers with regards to fatherhood. This knowledge would be used in designing programs to address those attitudes and opinions in an effort to interrupt the cycle of irresponsible/absentee parenting – especially as it regards fathers.

First, it was important to ascertain whether gender differences exist relative to the ways that fathers are perceived and if so, what those gender differences may mean in terms of the way that services are provided. Anecdotally, members of opposite genders process information differently; and hence, react in very different ways to the same situations. For that reason, we interviewed males and females separately in the first two groups, and then together for the final group. We also believed that it would be necessary to understand how much of how young people regard fathers and their role as future fathers (or their support role for future fathers), is derived from their experiences with their own fathers, especially where there have been step-

fathers or father figures in their lives. We also wanted to get a greater understanding of how their feelings about fatherhood are experienced and manifested on a daily basis.

In addition, we asked questions about both parents so that we could ascertain whether there were specific expectations of each parent and whether the roles were interchangeable.



## What is the Liberty Partnership Program?

The Liberty Partnership Program (LPP) at the Center for Women in Government & Civil Society (CWGCS) is a drop out prevention program targeted at young women and men in grades 7-12 who are at risk of leaving school prior to graduation. This program, which has two major components (Middle School and High School), is designed to provide a comprehensive range of services that support and encourage young people in obtaining their diploma, pursuing higher education and preparing to enter the workforce. The Center for Women in Government & Civil Society believes in the African proverb that states "it takes an entire village to raise a child" and therefore works collaboratively with a number of businesses, academic institutions, community-based organizations and state agencies as well as the students' school and family. These partnerships greatly benefit the program and its participants, resulting in increased service provision, greater community commitment, and a deeper sense of ownership.

We chose the Liberty Partnership Program because we believe that young adults who are at risk of dropping out of high school often reflect a general attitude of youth that are unable or unwilling to practice safe relationship behaviors. This is not to suggest that only high school dropouts demonstrate these behaviors, however 71% of all high school dropouts come from households where the father is absent. Therefore this process will allow us the opportunity to examine whether there is a relationship between such behaviors and the absence of fathers in the household.

### Focus group #1

This group consisted of males, ages 15-20 years, of African heritage and multiracial, born and raised in the Capital District. Although the majority is being raised in single parent households, some are living with a mother and stepfather, and one is living with an aunt. All of the parents have jobs outside of the home. A little less than half have either a father or a "father-figure" that is a part of their life.

### Observations/Learnings

All of the participants displayed an interest in discussing fatherhood. At times, the feeling in the room was light, and at others, a little emotionally tense. Participants felt comfortable enough to ask many questions and a few, more than willing to take the subject matter head on. A few of the young men were visibly emotional, while others chose to exhibit their discomfort in a humorous manner. One individual verbalized his desire not to engage in the conversation; however was interested in what others had to say.

The female co-facilitator was the only female in the room. That did not appear to impede the young men's willingness to open up. In fact, it is possible that it helped because we were able to address the issue of fatherhood from both the male and female perspective. It was also helpful when we had conversations about their attitudes towards mothers.

Although our mission was information gathering, it was impossible not to address their feelings of anger, frustration, indifference, confusion (and others) because we found that, when talking about the issue of fatherhood, there is a need to confront emotions and allow time within our session to understand their personal situations.

When asked, "What words or feelings come to mind when you hear the word "Father?", the first response was "Don't Care". Another participant stated that he considered his stepfather his "real father", and that if he had to call somebody daddy, it wouldn't be his real father. Another word was "pity, and the young man added that what he meant by that was that he pitied his dad for not being able to understand what he was missing by not being in his child's life.

We then asked them to offer one word to describe their father and mother. Some of the words that came up in response to father were, "Emptiness, Why?, Confusion, Sad, Betrayal, Loving, Memories, Anger, Loneliness. In response to mother, some of the words were Strong, Drunk, Caring, Hardworking, Loving, Elegant, Omniscient (we were impressed too), Sacrificial.

NOTE: With the exception of one individual whose experience with his dad was a positive one and who remembered his experience with his mom in a negative light, the overall feeling of the participants reflected a trend in negative attitudes towards fathers and endearing attitudes towards mothers. One participant felt that he "only wants to be the father his mother is."

When asked what a father's most important responsibility should be, interviewees responded with words like commitment, loyalty, to be there, responsible, maintaining a relationship, to listen, to communicate.

These questions lead to the question of whether a mother could be a father. There was consensus that "a man is a man." (Hence, it is not possible for a woman to be a father). Some participants spoke about understanding that there are things that a man has to provide to his children that a mother cannot, such as how to be and act like a man.

We ended this focus group posing a hypothetical question: "If you believed that your father thought that it was better for you that he was not in your life, would your opinion of him change?"

Although there was an array of responses, there was consen-

sus among the group. Interestingly enough, none could actually allow themselves to believe that that could ever actually be the case. For different reasons all of the participants felt that that was an excuse. For those young men for whom their father had been a part of their lives at some point, they felt that the decision to stay a part of their lives should have been the only real choice...and that even if something had happened in the relationship between their mother and father, he still should have chose to "stay involved." It was difficult for the participants to rethink, never mind release, their assumptions or perceptions about why their fathers chose not to be in their lives. There was a feeling that, to do so, would have forced them to consider what to do if in fact the blame and negativity focused at their father was misplaced. Their unwillingness to even consider the possibility that a father could have valid reasons for not being in their lives was highlighted by one participant who simply stated, "My mother stayed."

We left the participants with brochures and business cards to encourage further thought and discussion. We offered to come back and talk to them about anything they felt they needed in order to gain a better understanding about fathers and fatherhood – and their perspectives about them.

## Conclusions

This focus group revealed and confirmed that today's young men are dealing with the increased reality of absentee fatherhood. In fact we are entering possibly the third generation of youth living their lives without their father or a father figure to help them navigate the realities of manhood.

Sharing our own personal experiences helped the participants to trust us and engage in effective conversation. We talked about the emotion of anger and the fact that anger is a secondary emotion. More often than not it is the close companion of hurt, confusion, disappointment, disillusionment, and betrayal. Ironically, all of these words were used

at some point in talking about their relationships (or lack thereof) with their fathers.

The value of this particular focus group was priceless and immeasurable. As an agency we learned that while the attitudes of youth growing up in single parent homes are similar, there is a more prevalent reality that more and more homes reflect this situation, regardless of their composition. Even in those households where the biological father had been "replaced" by a stepfather, the negative feelings about the biological father still dominated the discussion about fathers and fatherhood.

In fact, when asked if their circle of friends for the most part reflected their own situations, most of them replied affirmatively. Further, when asked if they knew of families with more stable and traditional situations; as in that reflected on the TV

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show “the Cosbys”, it took them a minute and a struggle to come up with more than one family that reflected what they viewed as a stable family with two parents. One participant stated, “My friend’s family is like that, I like his dad, he’s cool.”

## Programmatic Suggestions

Based on the feedback that we received, we determined that:

- ❑ There needs to be increased attention to identifying programs and services for teenagers who are not yet fathers, but whose relationships with their own fathers have been dysfunctional. Those programs and services should allow for reflection and discussion about their feelings and knowledge about fatherhood based on their experiences.
- ❑ Increased emphasis must be placed on providing programs that help to teach clear and responsible decision-making regarding relationships and sexual behaviors.
- ❑ Programs that de-mystify the role of parent, and help young people to understand some of the challenges that parent face, need to be offered.
- ❑ Programs must offer young people an opportunity to engage in healing work around the issue of (physically or mentally) absentee fathers. These programs must create and provide an emotionally and physically safe space for adolescent and young adult males to talk about sensitive issues.
- ❑ More programs and services are needed to help define manhood and notions of masculinity. Manhood development/rites of passage programs are needed to model, teach and coach various aspects of manhood and fatherhood.
- ❑ Grant money should be secured to provide workshops to clients of existing community-based organizations at reduced or no cost.
- ❑ Further research into the attitudes and views of youth relative to fathers and fatherhood is needed. Research must be conducted by culturally competent researchers.
- ❑ Additional funding for responsible fatherhood initiatives needs to be appropriated at the local, State, and Federal level.
- ❑ For those groups and communities in which there is a disproportionate rate of absentee fathers, programs should address the specific historical and ongoing challenges that are faced by those particular groups, how they impact fatherhood relationships, and strategies for dealing with those challenges.

## Focus Group #2

The second focus group comprised 25 females. Of the 25, sixteen (64%) were Liberty Partnership Program participants and nine (36%) were staff and program volunteers. They were of Asian, African, Latino, and European heritage. More than one half of the young women live in a two-parent household. Only three of those (19%) live with both biological parents. Six (38%) live with one biological parent and a step parent. Five (31%) live in a (female) single parent and 1 (6%) lives in a (male) single parent household.

**Note:** this demographic information was only compiled on the Program participants, not staff or volunteers. It is important, however, to acknowledge that, while our primary focus was on the Program participants, staff and Program volunteers joined the discussion. The feedback obtained from the staff and volunteers, who were older, confirms the long term effects of unhealed hurts that are experienced at an earlier age.)

The female participants, unlike the males, were initially somewhat hesitant to engage in the conversation. It was obvious that there was a greater degree of emotion attached to even having a discussion about their fathers. However, after several exchanges of stories and comments, they began to feel more comfortable about talking about their attitudes and experiences about fathers.

75% of the participants answered that their biological father is active in their life; 25% have no interaction with their father.

Their responses to the question about the father’s most important responsibility were “being a caretaker, spending time, security and love.” One participant felt that the father’s most important responsibility is to care for the family financially. One participant, obviously reflecting the hurt of her personal experience, felt that a “sperm donor” was her father’s only contribution. Another stated that “My father should think of me as his world and would die for me.”

**Note:** For comparison purposes, this question about a father’s greatest contribution was also asked on our demographic survey. On the survey, eleven of the participants said “love”, three said “time” and two said “money”. Other responses included



"discipline", "role model", "allowing the freedom to pick my own path in life", and "communication." One participant said that she wanted her day to be "directly informed about my life, my problems and my needs." She stated that her father receives information from her mother about her, and that she receives all her information about him from her mother – but seldom is there direct communication between her and her father. Among participants who reported active fathers in their lives, responses included a need to know that their father is "as committed to me as my mother is" and "unselfishness". The participants expressed that smaller contributions are also just as important. The actions of calling, remembering birthdays, just checking in, give a sense that the father cares on a more intimate level. In our survey, of the participants answering the question characterizing their relationship with their father, six (38%) of the participants believe their relationship with their father to be "good." Five (31%) feel that their relationships need improvement.

Participants were asked why they thought that their fathers did not have more consistent contact with them. They responded with various "excuses" (their word) that their fathers had offered in the past including, "I don't like using the phone", "I don't have long distance service", "I'm busy", and "I misplaced your number." One person conjectured that her father possibly thinks that he has been "replaced."

When participants were asked to choose a word that they thought of when they heard the word father, participants responded with a variety of responses. There was a particular response that seemed to resonate with others when it was offered. The word was "leaving".

## Observations/Learnings

The extent to which young people are affected by the lack of one or more parents is directly related to the importance that the young person places on a particular situation, and to what extent their needs are being met by another (adult.) Consistent support, validation, and affirmation are absolutely vital for children and young people. The perception, or reality, of parental indifference or abandonment by a father, and the discussion of that, is accompanied by strong emotion for both males and females. In many, if not most, cases, these young people have never been encouraged to verbalize the hurt they feel around not having a father. For the most part, they have encountered either a lack of discussion, or discussions that only allow them to verbalize their feelings of indifference or anger. This emotional component will require a servicing agency of fatherhood/parenthood services to deal with the emotional, as well as the informational/educational aspects of the topic.

### A case in point:

At the conclusion of the focus group, it became clear that two of the participants - one a student and the other a volunteer staff person - were really struggling with some deep emotional feelings that we felt required some individual attention – but in the presence of the other participants so that they could ben-



efit from the increased attention. Their situations were absolutely different, yet produced the same emotional response.

Person #1: This young lady, Caucasian, age 19, has both parents in the home, described her father as a "good person" with whom she has a good relationship. She went on to say that he is not "emotionally there" in the way that she would like. She didn't feel like she could have meaningful father/daughter conversations and felt that her father saw his role as that of a provider, first and foremost. Subsequently, the young lady began talking about her relationship with her boyfriend and characterized her boyfriend as "just like her dad" in terms of his emotional detachment. She said she knows that he is wrong for her because of this, but just couldn't seem to let the relationship go...hoping that it would improve, but almost confident that it would not.

Person #2: This young lady, African heritage, age 15, was adopted at a very young age and has never known either of her parents. When asked what she would ask if she could pose any question, her hurt was verbalized by (rhetorically) asking her parents, "how could you do this to me?"; "How could you just walk away and leave me, and never even wonder about how I turned out?" "What could I have done to you to make you never even want to see me?" She talked about being tired of pretending that everything was alright, when she lives constantly with these feelings.

In both of the above cases, there were expressions of abandonment: one physical, the other emotional. In both cases, there were feelings of loss. In both cases, there was an attempt to figure out what they had done that would make the parent not want to be with them.

## Some interesting conclusions that we drew were:

Young people who have been raised with both parents take the presence of the parents as a given; they know nothing else. They can focus their attention, therefore, on the **quality** of the interaction between them and their parents. It is not enough then, for the parent to just be in the home, but the parent must be actively and emotionally present for that young person. In fact, there may be a higher expectation placed on the father to contradict stereotypes that are widely held about men and the parenting role.

Young people who have been raised without one or more parent focus on the **quantity** of time. During the focus group, people said things like, "I am not talking about just giving me money, but spending time with me." They did not qualify what the time would be spent doing – they just wanted to see the parent more often than just "once every few months" or "never."

The fatherhood issue transcends race, age and class. (although single, female head of household families may exist in disproportionate numbers in some groups.)

Like adults, the free expression of emotion by teenagers is based on a number of things: the reassurance that the environment is safe for them to show themselves, a feeling that they will not be judged or ridiculed, and a hope that, in doing so, they no longer have to bear this load by themselves.

The fact is that, pain that is not transformed, is transmitted. Therefore, the impact of fatherlessness is almost always intergenerational. People will enter relationships with "frozen needs" for companionship, for love, for cooperation, and for commitment from others. "Frozen needs" describe needs that are part of distress patterns which were installed in the past but which feel as if they are real, present needs to their victims when they are re-stimulated. Since these needs can never be met, only discharged, they present an ongoing challenge for relationships that are entered into.

***The impact of fatherlessness on female offspring is seldom discussed. Most experience a great deal of emotional challenges based on the absence of a father or father figure. Whether veiled in professed indifference or presented in outright distress, the inability to have basic nurture needs met from an early age by (preferably) both parents creates a lifelong injury to the human spirit, regardless of gender.***

## Conclusions

The impact of fatherlessness on female offspring is seldom discussed. Most experience a great deal of emotional challenges based on the absence of a father or father figure. Whether veiled in professed indifference or presented in outright distress, the inability to have basic nurture needs met from an early age by (preferably) both parents creates a life-long injury to the human spirit, regardless of gender. Further, though the expectation seems to be that the mother will always be the parent who can be counted on most faithfully to provide this nurturing, the absence of nurturing by the father is still devastatingly puzzling to young people, and in fact, continues to be puzzling throughout adulthood if not addressed.

### Programmatic Suggestions

Based on the feedback that we received, we determined that:

- ❑ Programs that give girls the opportunity to discuss and identify the impact of fatherless on their lives and their future relationships with men must be provided. Programs should have male **and** female facilitators to provide female participants with a balance of male/female energy. It is crucial to the development of healthy relationships that adolescent females bond with sober, responsible adult males who represent strong models of mentors and fathers.
- ❑ Programs which provide men with the opportunity to hear from women about the long-term impact of fatherlessness on women must be provided.
- ❑ Programs, which differentiate for fathers between "quality" and "quantity" of time spent with children, must be advanced.
- ❑ Programs should provide parents with additional skills that are necessary to have effective communication with their children.
- ❑ Programs must allow young people to look at how their self-image and self-esteem are tied to certain circumstances and/or events in their lives. Further, they need to be taught how self-esteem and self-image can impact everything from success in school and work to how they parent their child(ren).

### Focus Group #3

The final focus group in this series comprised both male and females and included participants from our past two focus groups, with some additions. This focus group allowed us to assess whether participants' individual relationships with oth-

ers (specifically members of the other gender) are impacted by relationships with, or lack thereof, their fathers. We also attempted to assess where participants' sense of how to interact with the other gender in relationships comes from – especially when they have received (less than positive) messages, or no direct information. Beyond that, we wanted to see how (for either gender) the lack of a father affects their ability to feel good about themselves and have healthy relationships, especially in a parenting role.

Given current U.S. statistics on teen pregnancy and sexual behaviors, we thought that it was safe to assume that our teenagers had at some point experienced some level of intimacy with the other gender (or maybe the same gender). While there are statistics that suggest that the average age for a first time sexual encounter in the NYC area is 13 years of age<sup>2</sup>, we did not discuss sex.

To see if they would make a connection between their attitudes towards relationships and the impact of their relationship (or lack of) with their father, we allowed them first to get comfortable with having a lighter conversation around their own romantic relationships. We attempted this by posing a few questions that spoke to their goals in life.

Nearly all of the 25 participants, irrespective of gender, indicated that at some point in their life, they would like to go to college. There were similar responses to the question about getting married and having kids. When initially asked if they

believed that their relationships with their father had any impact on those goals, they all responded, "no." Later, almost all rethought that answer.

Because it was clear from the first two groups that there was not an understanding or appreciation of the many responsibilities and challenges of life that may adversely impact parenting, we asked the young people to think about some of the things that could happen in life that might prevent someone from

achieving a particular goal – in the way that they have envisioned it happening. The responses included "making stupid mistakes, not thinking clearly because of low self-esteem, money, grades and other opportunities, and peer pressure." If married, they cited bad relationship experiences, careers, fear of commitment, distance and simply not being able to find the right person as reasons for further

**Fathers Incorporated's** Focus Group Report, **"Teenagers And Attitudes Toward Fatherhood"**, is a masterfully crafted roadmap that will lead our youth to healing their "Father wounds" and resolving self-esteem issues as they make their arduous journey from childhood to adulthood. Through its very comprehensive report, **Fathers Incorporated**, has identified the causes for the "disconnect" that is occurring between the generations and the steps that parents, concerned adults and our institutions must take to resolve it. **Fathers Incorporated** is urging all of us to examine closely the explicit and implicit messages that we convey to our children about Fatherhood, male-female relationships, sexuality, decision-making, success, failure and the world outside of their immediate environment.

**Diane A. Sears, Managing Editor**  
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deviating from that plan.

It was interesting to note that even in their young lives, they could clearly distinguish that there is a right path (and a wrong path) and reasons why thoughtful and planned decisions in life are important in order for a person to achieve their desired outcomes. By the same token, they were reminded that, even the best intentions do not by themselves mean that they will achieve all that they have set for themselves as goals. Visible successes, especially in terms of relationships, are key to being able to envision those things and then build a roadmap for success. Conversely, the absence of such successes makes goal achievement all the more difficult. Further, those images of life displayed for them by family and society are extremely influential.

Since most of the young people realized a connection between bad choices/decisions and success (however one defines that), there must be some reasons why our teenagers are making bad choices, knowing and understanding that they are bad choices – and at increasingly earlier ages. Many professionals conjecture that the lack of healthy family relationships with parents could be a strong cause.

As we began a discussion about relationships, we asked the young people to say what came to mind when they hear someone say relationship. Responses were "a bond, trust, respect, sharing life, understanding, compromise, throwing away pride and ego, collaboration, and reciprocity." When asked whether it was important to them that their mother and father maintain a good relationship even though they may not be together,



they answered affirmatively. All felt that it was crucial to the successful development of children to have parents cooperating and participating in the raising of their child(ren). One of the participants went further to say that this relationship is not only important when a child is young, but creates a lifelong example of the "fundamentals of a good relationship." We also had discussion about what the term relationship meant relative to this situation and distinguished again between *being in* a relationship and *having* a relationship, in that the latter does not require intimacy.

## Flow of Relationship Information

The passing of the Adolescent Family Life Act, which promotes "self discipline and other methods of sex education that includes abstinence-only education<sup>3</sup>, has caused national debate over the flow of information about sex. Earlier sexual activity by our young people is having an impact on ever-increasing rates of teenage pregnancy, the spread of HIV/AIDS and other STD's, homelessness, welfare, and high school drop out rates. We wondered about the difference between those things now, and for example, twenty years ago. We asked participants what their parent(s) have told them about the opposite gender. It was no surprise that there was a different emphasis placed on certain things based on the gender of the parent. For example, mothers said things like, "*I want to see him first*", "*Look out*" – *there are lots of phonies out there*", "*follow your heart, but look out for yourself*", "*the same way that someone is before marriage is the same way they will be during marriage – people don't change*", "*treat her nice*", "*stay with your own race*", "*wait until the time is right*", "*don't listen to boys – they'll say anything*". Fathers said things like, "*A guy that is unable to commit to you, will lie to you*", "*Guys can't be trusted – I was that age too!*" "*You're going to have to put up with the menstrual cycle and a lot of other things.*"

*Most people link the Hip-Hop culture and inner-city youth of color, and assume that certain behavior results from the influence of the culture.*



## The Impact of Hip-Hop Culture on Relationships

In each generation, youth are somewhat defined by the popular music culture, i.e.: rock and roll, jazz, disco, and swing. Observers of those cultures believe that they could ascribe certain behavior to its followers. Most people link the Hip-Hop culture and inner-city youth of color,

and assume that certain behavior results from the influence of the culture.

Laborlawtalk.com defines hip-hop as:

A cultural movement that began amongst urban African American youth in New York and has since spread around the world. The four main elements of hip-hop are MC'ing, DJ'ing, graffiti art, and breakdancing. Some consider beatboxing the fifth element of hip hop; others might add political activism, hip hop fashion, hip hop slang or other elements as important facets of hip hop. The term has since come to be a synonym for hip hop music and rap to mainstream audiences. They are not, however, interchangeable - rapping (MC'ing) is the vocal expression of lyrics in sync to a rhythm beneath it; along with DJ'ing, rapping is a part of hip hop music.<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to what we might believe, the majority of the participants did not describe themselves as being part of the hip-hop culture. In fact, only three of them did. Our participants also dismissed the notion that their picture of healthy relationships comes from what they see on M-TV or BET music videos, nor for that matter, do they look to those sources for that information. Even those who identified as being part of the culture, rejected the insinuation that music/videos could have more of an impact than maybe setting trends based on what the performers are wearing, driving, or saying. There was further acknowledgment that there is "good and bad in the culture. It depends on how you react (and act) to what you see."

## Conclusion (males and females)

Despite the fact that a large amount of the messages that youth receive regarding fashion, trends, and language from media and peers, it is clear that for the most part, young people are still looking to their own families for direction regarding relationships. The failure of families, and the society as a whole, to communicate and then exhibit, what healthy relationships mean, and how they can be achieved, is presenting a confusing paradox for today's young people. Videos, movies, music, etc. all lay out the premise that sexuality is normal.... without talking about the attendant consequences of irresponsible sexual behavior. Girls/women are seen largely as sex objects and men as always in pursuit of the dollar first. The tragedy is that

we allow the media to define family values, as opposed to the family dictating what values are acceptable for media to portray.

The impact of negative mother/father relationships and negative father relationships is ongoing. The Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth states, "Fathers cannot fully reconnect with families until the public – and fathers themselves – come to understand how important fathers are to their children." <sup>5</sup> Thus, we must take steps to encourage safe and respectful father/mother/child relationships.

When asked if they trust the advice of their parents regarding relationships, the answers varied, but were overwhelmingly that they could not. They ranged from not believing the advice to not being able to relate the advice to their own experiences.

It can be argued that the messages that these young people have received/are receiving are the same ones that adults have received. Therefore, other areas of life must be further examined to understand how these same messages are yielding different results in the successful rearing of our children.

In future focus groups, it will be necessary to examine the conversations and messages that parents are giving their children and how those messages are being reinforced and/or contradicted. Further there is a need to correlate these anecdotal messages into ones that have more of a connection to the present day realities of our children's lives. For instance, one participant explained that the advice he receives is vague. While he understands the reason for what is being said, often he must use his own judgment in applying what he's heard to his particular situation.



*Facilitators and/or support group guides should be required to participate in on-going professional development that allows them to continually explore their own "baggage" and biases regarding fathers.*

**David Miller, M.Ed.; Chief Visionary Officer; Urban Leadership Institute** - [www.urbanyouth.org](http://www.urbanyouth.org)

David has completed several publications which include, *Dare to be King: What If The Prince Lives? A Survival Workbook for African American Males*, *Lessons I learned From My Father: A Collection of Quotes From Men of African Descent* and he has begun working on *WHERE'S MOMMY & DADDY* (March 2005) a curriculum for social workers, educators and other professionals who work with children whom have a parent in prison.

## Programmatic Suggestions

Based on the feedback that we received, we determined that:

- ☐ Parents must be trained about how to give advice in a way that is more applicable to their child's situations.
- ☐ Programs must facilitate conversations between young men and women, which allow for the examination of how gender roles can facilitate successful child rearing.
- ☐ Programs must offer more opportunities for males and females to discuss the impact of responsible fatherhood on the lives of all involved.
- ☐ Programs that address dating issues, sex and healthy/unhealthy relationships must be offered.
- ☐ Programs must be offered which give direction and services for teenagers who are not yet fathers, but whose relationships with their own fathers have been dysfunctional.
- ☐ Programs that help to teach young people clear and responsible decision-making skills in relationships and sexual situations should be provided.
- ☐ More school based and community based programs (after school programs, summer camps and Saturday programs that focus on life skills and interpersonal development) that address core issues that young people face must be provided.

## Fathers Incorporated

The topic of fatherhood is fraught with emotional minefields. Perhaps for that reason, most agencies will focus on either the emotional or the educational/informational aspects – without realizing that the approaches are inextricably linked. In order to bring about meaningful change, responsible fatherhood initiatives must include both service and support components. Programs must allow sufficient time and opportunity for participants to do healing work around responsible fatherhood issues before attempting to give new information/education. It would be ineffective to offer information about responsible fatherhood if we were not first willing to hear what has kept someone from giving or receiving the benefits of good parenting. Organizations that deal with parents must understand the importance of responsible father and healthy family initiatives. They must understand and assess their organization's readiness to provide father-friendly services, and take steps to effect those changes that they deem necessary. Finally, those organizations must be about the task of implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of their efforts. It is only then that we can discuss what needs to be done to contradict past practice or what things an individual must focus on to be a good father/parent.

### Maintaining focus

It is clear that organizations like Fathers, Incorporated must maintain their focus on the father's role in the lives of their children. The failure of fathers to assume the role is clearly having a detrimental impact on the lives of youth; evident by the fact that both youth and adults are consciously or unconsciously continually dealing with the issue of father (or lack of) relationships.

"Men are more likely than women to believe that two parents are more effective at raising children than one parent alone." A specific emphasis on fathers will assist support agencies in dealing with what appears to be the most pressing issue in parental relationships. Unquestionably the wounds caused by the lack of one parent (in most cases, the father) persist throughout a person's life if not addressed, and adversely impacts all other relationships. As stated, youth will innately favor the parent that supplies their basic survival needs. However, the young people were very clear that fathers and mothers meet very different needs and the roles are not interchangeable. Therefore, while basic survival (tangible and intangible) supplies may be provided by one parent, there are still many needs that require the attention of each parent.

### Closing the loop

Closing the loop is critical for agencies providing issue oriented workshops and support sessions for youth regarding fatherhood/parenthood. Structured models should be used to engage male and female adolescents in discussions involv-

ing such sensitive issues. These models should be culturally and environmentally sensitive. Groups and/or sessions with this population should be interactive as opposed to didactic. Adolescents and young adults must be given the opportunity to shape and direct the discussions. Facilitators and/or support group guides should be required to participate in on-going professional development that allows them to continually explore their own "baggage" and biases regarding fathers. Because more specific issues of fatherhood have deep emotional connections, analysis must be conducted to determine whether programming is being successful. Adverse effects on successful measurable outcomes can occur if an agency doesn't take into consideration that the emotional needs of the client must be explored and met.

### Benefits of Focus Group for Youth

The mission of the focus groups was to obtain insight and information regarding the attitudes of teenagers towards fatherhood. However the information gathered also allowed for other valuable insight around issues such as effective child/parent communication, self-reflection, perceptions of others, learning process of life, and human behavior. The group discussions surfaced many areas of concern that must be explored in the future by Fathers, Inc. and other interested organizations.

When the participants were asked what they learned in the focus group process, some of the responses that were offered included, "I learned to stay out of bad relationships", "We don't always have to use the lack of a father as an excuse" for certain behaviors", "I hadn't realized the connection between my relationship with my father and my other male relationships", "Can have good and bad relationships", and most gratifying for us, "I am encouraged and hopeful that groups like Father's Inc. are working at making fathers more responsible – maybe other kids won't have my experience."

#### (Footnotes)

- 1) 2003 report by Youth Organizers United, Inc. (YOU)
- 2) Planned Parenthood Fact Sheet, "Abstinence-Only "Sex Education"; July 2004
- 3) Hip Hop Definition - [www.encyclopedia.laborlawtalk.com/Hip-Hop](http://www.encyclopedia.laborlawtalk.com/Hip-Hop)
- 4) Fathers Matter 2001, What Community Foundations Can Do; The Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth
- 5) Charting Parenthood: A Statistical Portrait of Fathers and Mothers In American; Child Trends 2002



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## Mission Statement

Fathers, Inc. is dedicated to strengthening the community and family infrastructure by encouraging and enabling the positive involvement of fathers in the lives of their children. We will do this by increasing awareness among fathers of their responsibilities and impact through community collaborations, providing support services, training, and assistance to fathers in need of sustenance and direction.

Fathers, Incorporated is a New York State not-for-profit (S) corporation. The organization is based in Albany and its jurisdiction comprises the inner cities of Albany, Schenectady, Troy and Amsterdam.



## Additional Contributing Comments

I've seen many of these reports, task forces, commissions, men's organizations, crisis committees, conferences on this issue, but your summation is timely and quite enlightening. It also contains excellent analysis, research and reasonable conclusions that do not generalize about men, or youth, as is often the case. I hope that it garners the audience—and action—that it deserves.

**Ronald E. Childs** is an award-winning writer, editor, public relations practitioner and photographer whose work frequently appears in Black-interest publications throughout the United States, Africa (Ethiopia), the Caribbean, Brazil and Great Britain. [www.theomenonline.com](http://www.theomenonline.com) and [www.afriquejournal.com](http://www.afriquejournal.com).

## Special Thanks

We are grateful to the staff and students of the Liberty Partnership Program Rising Stars Program of the University at Albany's Center for Women in Government & Civil Society. For more information on LPP please contact their Director, Candi Griffin, M.A. at (518) 442-3885

## Conclusion

Throughout the country, organizations are focusing on the issue of absentee fathers and all its attendant disturbing effects and statistics. Fathers, Inc. recognizes the need for all to reaffirm the benefit of fathers to the family. To do so, our main focus will be on the development of fathers, although not to the exclusion of mothers. Unwed men who are struggling with life invariably and frequently negatively impact all who give care and direction to their children. Individuals, generations, and the society as a whole, feels the impact of this abdication. When fathers and mothers cannot work things out amicably and civilly, often one or both, abdicates their responsibility as parent. For these reasons, we recognize the need for parallel maternal involvement and development, specifically as those things intersect around parental responsibility.

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